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ABSTRACT

A new core curriculum at Newmann College (Pennsylvania) aims to provide liberal learning through cross-disciplinary instruction without destroying the identity of specific content areas. The Collaborative Probing Model (CPM) provides a basis for the kind of creative self-control that will lead to flexible work within and between disciplines. This model interrelates discovery, process, and assessment. Using the CPM, a personal development seminar course can integrate problem solving, critical thinking, values clarification, and communication skills. Discovery in this course consists of probing all avenues of information (what one already knows, what one learns from the media, what one learns from friends and others, what one learns from reading, and so forth). Assessment includes self, peer, and teacher intervention. Process implies several approaches which are designed to allow students to see themselves as writers. Discovery through journal keeping will interact with process to allow growth in abstract reasoning. A combination of assessment and process can occur when peer review is incorporated in a collaborative learning setting. An introduction to problem solving also joins assessment to process as students learn to represent things to themselves in order to judge critically what they read, write, and hear. The true point of synergy occurs when all three activities are working recursively together in the writing/reasoning model (CPM). A pilot project of the CPM approach with a group of PACE (Program for Academic Competence and Enrichment) students will present an opportunity to test this theory of holism. (HOD)

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The Personal Development Seminar: Probing Disciplinary Perspectives

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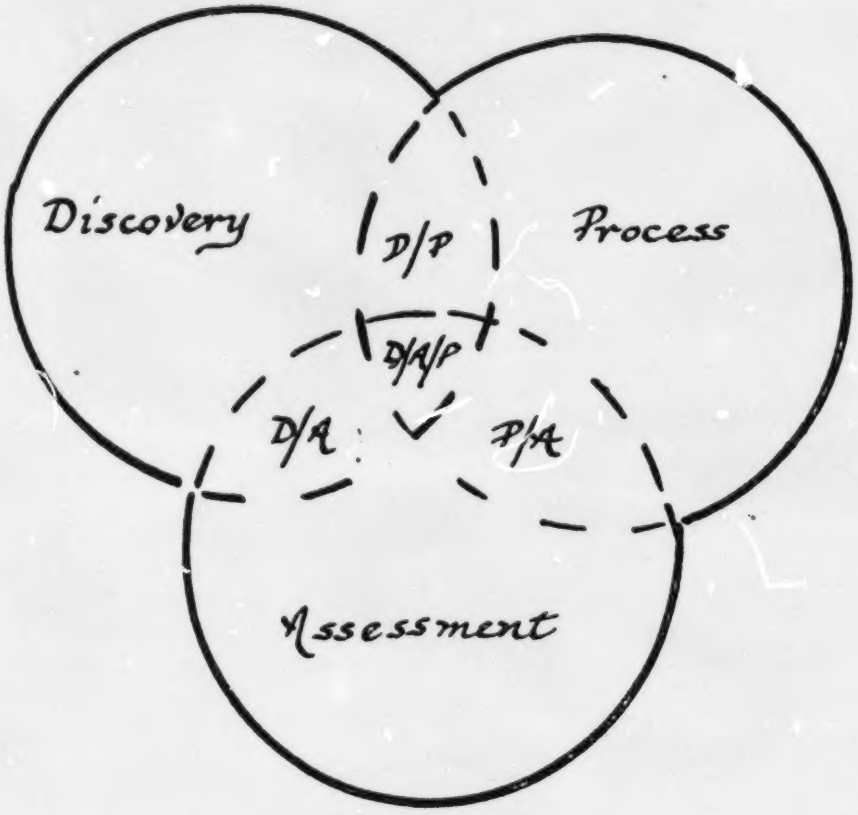
Collaborative Probing



The Personal Development Seminar:
Probing Disciplinary Perspectives

Probing Goals

The new core curriculum at Neumann College aims to provide liberal learning through cross-disciplinary instruction without destroying the identity of specific content areas. What is wanted is a synergistic implementation of certain "competencies" which reflects a deeper awareness of values and a flexibility of mind to consider problems from a variety of perspectives. We describe this objective as "holism" in which the whole of education is greater than the sum of a number of discrete content courses.

The word "discipline" itself, of course, means self-control. When we work within a field of study, this very kind of discipline is necessary to maintain method, format and perspective. Sister Bernadette and I believe that our Collaborative Probing Model (CPM) can provide a basis for the kind of creative self-control that will lead to flexible work within and between disciplines.

Etymologically too, the OED tells us, the word "discipline," as it pertains to disciple or scholar, is antithetical to the word "doctrine," which is the property of the doctor or teacher. In the history of words, therefore, doctrine is more concerned with abstract theory, and discipline with practice or exercise.

Consequently, the emphasis is on the way the study is carried out, on the movement and process within the field. Sister Bernadette and I think that our CPM can represent the activity involved in any disciplinary or thinking endeavor. The interaction of Discovery, Process and Assessment generates, sustains and validates the whole of intellectual activity.

Furthermore, we suspect the CPM can operate as a heuristic to ensure holism throughout the academic hierarchy, in as much as the model insinuates the dynamic involved in a writing-based, collaborative learning setting. On the individual level, research has shown that student ability to reason critically develops when writing is structured into the curriculum. Moreover, specific course design can reflect (as it has in the courses Sister Bernadette and I have developed) the scope of activity this model represents. In addition, curriculum cohesion may be maintained through reference to this model, and faculty collaboration can be augmented (even if it only stimulates discussion) by just the barest, sub-conscious allusion to this plan. Finally, administrative involvement might be encouraged by the flexibility of focus the model allows. In all, a uniform theoretical base can function throughout the college community, for the CPM heuristic works as a cohesive device--primarily by providing a flexible focal point, but also by giving direction for specific goals.

To fulfill the goal of holism at Neumann College, a series of three courses is offered to lead students early in their academic careers to gain communication and other skills within the context of cross-disciplinary experiences.

C.A. 100 helps students to define a discipline by being a person in that discipline. In a concrete way, students will gain familiarity with the activities of practitioners of certain disciplines. By role playing, students will learn to know the general way of functioning within a field of study.

The six-credit oral/written communications block shows the student how individuals express themselves within a particular discipline. These courses will deal in a more abstract manner with the modes of thinking characteristic of various disciplines: (1) what is regarded as evidence; (2) what constitutes proof; (3) what are considered to be important intellectual processes; (4) what are seen as major persuasive devices; and (5) what can be identified as major characteristics in the use of language.

The Personal Development Seminar (PDS)--the course I am developing--will furnish content (texts) within which these modes of thinking can be applied. This course will help students to see how individuals from various fields interpret data and to witness what these individuals bring to an evaluation of an idea or situation. Although writing

will be used extensively in this course (for the most part in the form of journal keeping), this is not a writing or "composition" class. We will focus instead on developing through practice the analytical skills and disciplinary viewpoints necessary for informed and sophisticated reading and thinking. Writing here will be used as a tool to engage thinking. As "reasoning in action," writing will allow students to voyage beyond the literal meaning of the text so as to participate in DAP--the dynamic center of the CPM--in which their acting upon the text will be creatively self-controlled, i.e. holistically "disciplined." Attention will be directed to the areas where various modes of thinking across the curriculum overlap and where they differ so that liberal education may mean the ability to discover answers to problems in a creative, holistic, informed way.

Probing Method

As a natural sequence to the Effective Writing/Critical Reading course, the PDS will continue the collaborative probing method (illustrated by the modified Venn diagram) in order to meet a variety of aims: in the interest of "holism" a cross-disciplinary approach will integrate problem solving, critical thinking, values clarification and communication skills. The holistic model for collaborative probing furnishes a visual of the dynamic which relates the key activities in any act of thinking. Since we are all language-bound, writing is said by many theorists to cause, to allow thinking to take place because it draws upon all cognitive factors in a complex, involved way. Writing, again, is reasoning in action. Consequently, in this section of my paper I will investigate writing-based activities which will fulfill objectives of the PDS and which will demonstrate how the CPM might meet curricular goals.

In the case of the latter, the CPM shows how a common concern of faculty members (holism) can be addressed by focusing on the natural recursive elements of thinking and writing. By breaking down the cognitive operations in this way, we can see the possibility of interjecting a control (assessment) to provide any adjustment that may be necessary in the usual leap between stages of exploration and discovery. Yet our use of assessment is person-based rather than product-

based to enable students to demonstrate competence as well as to check their work, and to stimulate the very movement of discovery and learning.

Forming the theoretical model for the collaborative probing approach, the intersecting circles also supplies the basis for incorporating the multifarious aims of the PDS. In my discussion of the PDS, therefore, the CPM acts as a demonstration as well as a description.

Discovery consists of probing all avenues of information: what I already know, what I learn from the media, what I "pick up" during casual chats with friends, relatives and teachers, what I glean during casual reading, what I gather during more directed class sessions and out-of-class discussions, what I discover as I do specific library research, what I intuit from life experiences. As a result, we are redirecting learning so as to suggest to the student that intellectual curiosity cannot be confined to a building, situation or time. The entire world becomes a learning center. To further emphasize this approach, we will try to get our students to think in terms of problems, rather than of topics so that even the sub-conscious will be continuously engaged in the probe for new knowledge and new connections. In order to stimulate discovery, heuristics may be implemented.

Assessment includes self, peer and teacher intervention at appropriate points so that a check can be made to see whether we are still "on track." We will use an assessment sheet in

evaluation of work in progress in order to help keep the student focused on the task at hand.

Process implies several approaches which are designed to make our students see themselves as writers. Ideally, we will engage the student in what Britton calls "involved" rather than "perfunctory" writing. A journal will serve to encourage "private" writing throughout the course as a means of thinking out problems. Following Moffett's progression from "drama" to "argumentation" will allow an approach consistent with cognitive growth as well as a means of moving from the concrete to the more abstract. As a result, early writing will deal with the students' personal feelings and beliefs about selected issues. Since the intuitive, instinctual sense is said to be more developed in students than their analytical sense, one way to move from the personal to the more objective might be to have students go back to analyze their own writing using tagmemics and other heuristics. In this way students might see the relationships inherent in their own intuitive conceptions. Students engaged in their own writing will then become aware of the connections that had been made "automatically." Another approach might be to take the same assignment and move from description to argument with it. By viewing the problem from the perspectives of various "knowledge communities," students may practice writing (and thinking) for a number of purposes and audiences.

Several aims of the PDS are met in the sets indicated by the intersecting circles of the holistic CPM. Discovery through journal keeping will interact with process (DP) to allow growth in abstract reasoning. A number of assignments could be designed to help students become more sophisticated in this area. For example, students can be given data (or can collect it from their journal entries) and then can generalize about it and discover a term which will encompass it. An ancillary activity would be to have students "role play" to learn to see the data from a variety of perspectives. Recognizing that there are more than one possible interpretation of a given problem is the first step to understanding how each discipline offers its unique vision to resolving a problem. Many times merely seeing a problem from one or even two perspectives is not sufficient to unravel complexities that develop in the modern world. The road to such knowledge of ourselves and of the world rests, however, in the ability to function within the realm of abstraction and to form generalizations in a flexible manner. We can thus teach students that they have the power to manipulate data, to impose a structure on the data, and to control it by providing categories. We can also show students how to go "outside of themselves" to view the world in a more objective and mature way.

In addition, students can probe values along every step of Moffett's line of cognitive progression through DP, a

journalistic discovery process focused through collaboration on subjects taken from a number of disciplines. According to Bruffee, in collaborative learning students focus primarily on what each other has to say and on the way other students and they themselves apply their values in the process of making judgments and arriving at decisions. The teacher will create in the classroom conditions in which learning judgment can occur (Bruffee gives four models for collaborative learning). The students' beliefs will be explored in the journal before and after the collaborative learning experience. A comparison of the two entries might then be investigated later in any number of ways: group discussions, a reflective paper to be "abandoned to the public," a formal comparison/contrast theme in a detached mode. The latter might be an effective exercise in objectifying personal experience and in moving from the specific to the general.

A combination of assessment and process (AP) occurs when peer review is incorporated in a collaborative learning setting. Bruffee quotes Timbur when he asserts that "cognitive development is mediated by social relations." The students' tools of critical thinking are sharpened as they realize that evaluation is a form of judgment, especially one for which they must take responsibility. Discussion in small groups of writers will collaboratively explore how they evaluate one another's written work in progress. Assessment joins in the process of learning to trust one another's

judgment, and stresses critical skills.

An introduction to problem solving also joins assessment to process (AP) as students learn to represent things to themselves in order to judge critically what they read, write and hear. According to moffett, representing reality to oneself and presenting it to others are merely two aspects of the same process, which is abstraction. A consciousness of "argument indicators" in tree-diagraming emphasizes the structure and cohesion of well-articulated thought. In general, logic makes people objective in reading, independent of what they believe to be true. Here is an opportunity to consider how "perfectly logical" arguments might be used irresponsibly to manipulate.

The intersection of discovery and assessment (AD) supplies the mechanism for gathering data by means of heuristics and then checking how categories might emerge. The ability to move from particular to general is a cognitive skill necessary for successful thesis articulation as well as for the more complex exigencies of cohesive thinking and writing.

The true point of synergy occurs, of course, when all three activities are working recursively together in the writing/reasoning model (CPM). DAP can be seen to take place in the use of peer review of an actual writing sample. A multitude of skills are learned as well as critical thinking and values. Bruffee suggests that these evaluations be graded (on thoroughness, insight, tact and the quality of

writing displayed) since "written peer writing is the most 'real' writing students ever do as students." Such "real" writing is the goal, for the symbiotic relationship between language and thought can only be charged by engaged writing. Such involvement summons the maximum cognitive effort of students so that, with the support of writing, students may fully develop their ability to analyze and to synthesize.

Probing Context

The concept of "holistic" education presupposes a desire to produce students capable of independent thinking and learning. We hope that by providing the CPM as an unobtrusive yet substantive heuristic, the core sequence can allow the multiplicity of disciplinary views to work to the advantage rather than to the confusion (or, worse, to the apathy) of students.

Sister Bernadette and I will pilot the CPM approach with a group of PACE (Program for Academic Competence and Enrichment) students. Their program constitutes a specialized, controlled learning experience in which fewer courses must be taken at once and in which an extra year is allowed for completing requirements. The ultimate aim, of course, is to integrate these students within the academic mainstream.

By choosing these particular students, we are able to pilot our approach with a group whose progress we might monitor and with students who will experience the entire sequence of CPM courses (100, 101 & PDS). What's more, the PACE program includes in the freshman year a three-credit study skills course the first semester and a one-credit follow-up group study course the second semester for which the students themselves have responsibility. We see this self-designed format as an ideal opportunity to test our theory of holism since the students participating in the cross-disciplinary approach will be able to integrate their work with a certain degree of independence.

Since the PACE students will also be registered for traditional introductory courses in biology, sociology and philosophy, I have chosen as one of the texts for the PDS Peter Singer's The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology. This book is a response to Edward O. Wilson's controversial work, Sociobiology, which maintains that altruism is a product of evolution rather than of morality. With a truly cross-disciplinary perspective, Singer examines whether ethical considerations can in reality be factually and therefore expeditiously interpreted.

Although aimed at a broad audience, Singer is a philosopher who consequently values logical explanations, reasoned arguments and clear illustrations. His book also represents a number of disciplinary focuses, the very ones (biology, sociology and philosophy), as I pointed out earlier, that our PACE students will be taking simultaneously in traditional content courses which fulfill core requirements. In itself, therefore, the use of The Expanding Circle will generate a cross-disciplinary view of relationships. Supported by writing and collaborative learning procedures, student thinking can be moved beyond the mere collection of data.

Peter Singer writes in a lucid style which may serve as an admirable model for student work. More importantly perhaps, The Expanding Circle cogently illustrates how various

modes of thinking are naturally integrated into one text. Exemplification, definition, comparison/contrast, and critical analysis are deftly interwoven to explicate Singer's thesis. Indeed, by looking at the book itself as an art form, another disciplinary perspective can be investigated.

Using Kinneavy's delineation of aims, the PDS will begin briefly with Expression and move quickly to concentrate on Exposition and Persuasion. Classification and Evaluation will provide the most frequent disciplinary modes, although others may be employed as discovery procedures warrant them. The goal, again, is to instill flexibility in thinking and writing. We do not want the modes to become a straight-jacket to students' thinking but rather a flowing robe whose style and function can be adapted easily with the addition of a belt or with a roll of the sleeves. Comparison/contrast, cause/effect, or definition should equip students to create an ensemble which communicates appropriately through both form and content and for both audience and occasion. The garb is much more than a decorative sign: it serves as a medium for thought and signifies the perceptive use of disciplinary perspective. Finally, it allows entrance into what each discipline may believe to be a society of sophisticated opinions, well-bred judgments, and influential ideas.

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APPENDIX

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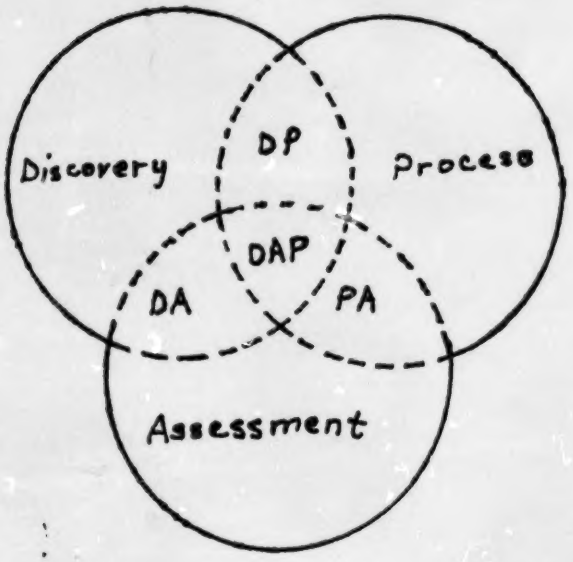
Collaborative Probing Model



D--prob all avenues and consider problems rather than topics.

P--probe the means of connecting ideas.

A--probe controls which adjust and stimulate the movement between discovery and exploration.

The intersection of the circles of the holism model suggests how curricular goals may be met:

DP--<u>abstract reasoning</u> through manipulation of journal data;
--<u>values</u> through collaborative methods of forming judgments.

PA--<u>critical thinking</u> through evaluations encouraging responsible judgment;
--<u>problem solving</u> and <u>abstract thinking</u> through learning ways to represent reality to oneself and to others.

DA--<u>cognitive skills</u> (i.e. moving from specific to general; thesis articulation) through collecting data and checking for categories.

DAP--<u>synergy</u>through the development of disciplinary perspectives and the practice of "involved" writing."